

August 31, 2012

To: Public Safety, Civil Rights & Technology Committee
Government Performance & Finance Committee

From: Peter Harris, Central Staff

Re: Evidence-Based Assessment of the City's Crime Prevention Programs

Introduction

On September 6 the City Auditor and I will brief the Government Performance & Finance Committee on a report titled "Evidence-Based Assessment of the City of Seattle's Crime Prevention Programs," prepared by Charlotte Gill and others from the George Mason University Center for Evidence Based Crime Policy (CEBCP). The report was requested by the Council last year after the City Budget Office (CBO) conducted its own review of City crime prevention programs in response to a Statement of Legislative Intent.

The main finding of the CEBCP assessment is essentially the same as one of the main findings of the CBO review. Five of the 63 programs deliberately replicate or otherwise closely follow models backed by good evidence of positive effects. These include the Mentoring element of the Youth Violence Prevention Initiative (YVPI), Methadone Voucher program, Multisystemic Treatment program, Nurse-Family Partnership and Code Compliance Team in the Seattle Nightlife Initiative. For the rest, there is no good evidence that they prevent crime. According to CEBCP assessment, a few resemble programs that have increased crime.¹

The Auditor's cover memo to the CEBCP assessment introduces and summarizes the assessment. In this memo I will emphasize a few key points:

The opportunity cost of not preventing crime is the greatest cost of untested programs.

The CEBCP assessment is not evidence of effectiveness in itself. It is a guide to confirming or obtaining evidence.

"Moderate potential for effectiveness" does not mean good enough for government work.

The risk of doing harm with untested programs is real.

¹ From page 8 of the 2011 CBO review, Clerk File 311484: "[With] the exception of those few programs that model scientifically tested programs, none of the programs can validly claim to be responsible for reducing crime." From pages 5-6 of the CEBCP assessment: "[Five] programs [out of 63] have a strong potential for effectiveness. These programs bear a close resemblance to existing programs that have been evaluated . . . [Twelve] programs have a moderate potential for effectiveness. [The rest] are inconclusive . . . have the potential to backfire . . . [or] could not be matched to existing research or theory."

The opportunity cost of not preventing crime is the greatest cost of untested programs.

In the political history of social programs, a statement that a program is ineffective or may not justify its cost often has been followed by the argument that the program should be cut and the money no longer collected for this purpose from taxpayers. This is not a necessary implication, but sometimes it is assumed even by advocates for the program or purpose. For example, a few years ago, when pressed for a comparison of costs to benefits, a consultant hired to evaluate three City crime prevention programs said, “these things never pay for themselves,” and then told the Council that it should continue to fund the programs nonetheless because they are the right thing to do.

Fortunately he was wrong about costs and benefits. Thanks to years of rigorous scientific evaluations, we now know of many crime prevention programs that save more public dollars than they cost, and many more for which the public and private savings combined are greater than the cost.²

We also know that there are large public and private savings to be captured with effective crime prevention. The annual combined public and private cost of reported serious crime in Seattle is in the neighborhood of \$600 million.³

Here is the point: By observing that most City crime prevention programs are not backed by good evidence that they prevent crime, CBO and CEBCP and the Auditor and I are not arguing for less crime prevention effort. We are suggesting the Council consider better crime prevention efforts – that is, crime prevention programs supported by good evidence.

The CEBCP assessment is not evidence of effectiveness. It is a guide to confirming or obtaining evidence.

The CEBCP assessment does not itself provide evidence on the effectiveness of the City programs, one way or the other. CEBCP compared the short descriptions in the CBO report to the literature on what works and what doesn’t in crime prevention. These comparisons tell us what CEBCP thinks we would likely find if we were to carefully evaluate the City programs. They are not themselves evaluations:

“[We] assessed the descriptions provided in the CBO report for each of the 63 programs to identify their primary crime prevention mechanisms and theoretical bases, and then compared them against the most rigorous research evidence . . . Note that our scheme makes no representation as to the actual effectiveness of the specific programs implemented in Seattle. Our goal is to map Seattle's programs onto the existing evidence base . . . in order to identify which of Seattle's programs are likely to be effective or ineffective. As such, we

² For example, in addition to the CEBCP assessment, see Lee et al., “Return on Investment: Evidence-Based Options to Improve Statewide Outcomes: April 2012 Update,” Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2012, available at <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/>.

³ For estimates of cost per crime, see Lee et al, op. cit.; Cohen and Piquero, “New Evidence on the Monetary Value of Saving a High Risk Youth,” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Vol. 25, No. 1, March 2009, pp. 25–49; Heaton, “Hidden in Plain Sight: What Cost-of-Crime Research Can Tell Us About Investing in Police,” RAND 2010, available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP279.html. The \$600 million estimate is calculated by multiplying the estimated cost from these sources for each kind of offense by the number of such reported offenses in Seattle in 2010.

classified the programs according to their potential for effectiveness rather than their actual measured effectiveness.” (CEBCP assessment, pages 1-2)

This means the assessment is not the final answer. It is not even an attempt at a final answer. It is a guide to finding the answers, program by program. This leads to the next point.

“Moderate potential for effectiveness” does not mean good enough for government work.

In the CEBCP assessment, the potential for effectiveness is a function of three things. One is the quality of the evidence behind the model program to which the City program is similar. Another is what the evidence shows about the effect of the model on crime – that is, whether evaluations of the model show that it consistently reduces crime, has no effect, or makes things worse, or some combination of these. The third is the degree of similarity between the model and the City program.

The assessment makes many fine distinctions along these dimensions, some highly nuanced. For example, the assessment uses “resembles” to indicate a stronger relationship than “similarity” between a City program and a model. (My dictionary defines “resemble” as “to be like or similar to.”) Various combinations of evaluations of different quality and number, findings of effects in different directions, and forms of similarity between City programs and models lead in different ways to the broad categories of strong potential, moderate potential, inconclusive and potential for backfire.

For example, strong potential for effectiveness means the model is well supported by high quality evidence showing that it consistently reduces crime, and the City program closely follows the model. Moderate potential means that one or more of these is compromised. Either the evidence behind the model is less than high quality, or is inconsistent, or there is reason to question whether the City program exactly follows the model.

These and the other broad categories and subcategories within them are the basis for CEBCP’s recommendations, summarized in the table on page 10 of the assessment. The recommendations suggest how the City could put each program on a solid evidence base, depending on its relationship to a model and the quality of evidence behind the model. For example, if the City program is similar to a model backed by consistent good evidence, the task will be to ensure that the City program follows the model accurately – that is, replicates the model with fidelity. If the evaluations of the model are not high quality or have yielded mixed results, but some of the results are promising and the City wants to try such a program, the way to evidence will be a local outcome evaluation.

What the assessment is not a basis for is inaction. This may apply particularly to the somewhat tempting category of programs with moderate potential for effectiveness. Moderate quality evaluations are not high quality because their methods do not eliminate threats to the validity of the results. Because model programs are evaluated as wholes, we have no way of knowing whether seemingly small differences between a City program and a model will affect the results. Aside from the few City programs that deliberately replicate high quality models and may routinely measure implementation fidelity – the Nurse Family Partnership and Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring may both qualify, for example – there is no basis in this assessment for simply continuing what we are doing now.

The risk of doing harm with untested programs is real.

In the mid-2000's, Pittsburgh experienced a serious gang violence problem, and began a street outreach program called One Vision One Life. The program was modeled on Chicago Ceasefire, a widely praised program built on public health principles by Gary Slutkin.

The RAND Corporation evaluated One Vision One Life by comparing shootings before and after implementation of the program in several neighborhoods where the program was implemented and, as control groups, in several comparable neighborhoods where it was not implemented. RAND found that shootings went up in the treatment neighborhoods. That is, the program intended to reduce serious violence seemed instead to be increasing it. So far no one knows why.⁴

This is closer to home than we might like. As described in the CEBCP assessment, the Street Outreach and Critical Incident Response element of Seattle's YVPI is similar to Chicago Ceasefire, and YVPI is proud to have Slutkin's endorsement.⁵ As yet there has been no formal evaluation of YVPI, either as a whole or of the street outreach element specifically.

In part because of the Pittsburgh experience, CEBCP categorizes this YVPI program as inconclusive due to mixed results. I emphasize the Pittsburgh experience here because of the nature of the risk it shows – not, for example, an elevated probability of future delinquency among some middle school students, but shootings.

One of the articles on One Vision One Life cited in footnote 4, Papachristos's "Too big to fail," is an illuminating discussion of the kinds of politics that often surround crime prevention efforts and sometimes lead them to ignore evidence. It deserves study. I've attached it here.

Conclusion

If the City wants to put its crime prevention programs on a solid evidence base, to ensure that they are doing the most possible to prevent crime and are not wasting money or making things worse, the CEBCP assessment can help. CEBCP's recommendations outline steps the City could take with its programs, depending on the nature of the relationship each program may have to a model program and the quality of evidence behind the model.

The Auditor recommends starting with the programs CEBCP identifies as having a potential risk of backfiring. Beyond this there is much latitude. Eliminating any programs that are wasting money may be one priority, but the opportunity costs of not preventing crime suggests the City may also want to focus on getting the most benefit from the programs that may be working, or consider new programs with a strong evidence base.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

⁴ Wilson, J. M., Chermak, S., and McGarrell, E. F. "Community-driven violence reduction programs: Examining Pittsburgh's One Vision One Life"; Kennedy, D. M., "Whither streetwork? The place of outreach workers in community violence prevention"; and Papachristos, A.V., "Too big to fail: The science and politics of crime prevention," all in *Criminology & Public Policy*, v. 10 #4, November 2011.

⁵ <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/education/youthInitiative/documents/SYVPI-2011ProgressReportlowres.pdf>